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Deposited in DRO:

10 May 2011

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Edgar, Iain R. and Henig, David (2010) 'Istikhara : the guidance and practice of Islamic dream incubation through ethnographic comparison.', *History and anthropology*, 21 (3). pp. 251-262.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2010.496781>

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Istikhara: The Guidance and practice of Islamic dream incubation through ethnographic comparison

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This paper introduces and contextualizes Istikhara, Islamic dream incubation practice, as a way to approach the dynamics of Muslims' inner and outer worlds as an interrelated process of embodied well-being. We introduce an anthropologically informed debate on healing dreaming in Islam and Islamic healing dreaming practices. Based on our research, we discuss ethnographic examples of Istikhara as practised by British Pakistanis, Pakistanis and last but not least a case study from a corner of the Muslim world, Muslim Bosnia. We explore a shared propensity to dream, though a culturally informed one, and situate the practice into a general economy of Muslim well-being.

Key words: *dreaming, healing, Islam, Istikhara, Pakistan, Bosnia*

If you ask a Muslim about dreams, you will be perhaps told of a significant dream narrative that has influenced his/her life. Through the capacity and power of the imagination Muslims transfigure dreams creatively into comprehensive and persuasive narratives that help them to navigate the unpredictable terrain of everyday life and overcome the afflictions or encounters with supposed malevolent powers. Islam and dreams are inevitably interrelated since its very outset and we might think of Islam as probably the largest night dream culture in the world today. Dreams have been firmly anchored in the imagination of many Muslim societies and Islamic traditions at large, in the past as well as in the present.

The scriptural tradition differentiates between three kinds of dreams. First come true spiritual dreams, *ru'an*, inspired by God; second come dreams inspired by the devil; third come dreams from the *nafs*, or ego which are considered unimportant. As we have argued elsewhere (Edgar & Henig 2010: 66), from West Africa to the Philippines, the tripartite schematization of dreams explained above is part of the world view of the majority of Muslims, not just the especially pious. This was confirmed by Edgar's fieldwork in the UK, Turkey, Northern Cyprus, and Pakistan and by Henig's fieldwork in Dagestan and collaborative research in Bosnia-Herzegovina, during which we were interviewing people from all walks of life.

However, an important part of dream lore in Islam is the relatively little known, outside of the Islamic community, phenomena of *Istikhara*. *Istikhara* has one main practice with either a focus on consequent daytime guidance or guidance through dream symbolism. Different authors (Aydar 2009, Gouda 1991) stress the importance of daytime guidance whilst others stress guidance experienced through dreams. Nonetheless, most of the sources we have come across during our fieldworks include dreams as one core part of *istikhara* practice. Aydar (2009: 123) describes the essence of *istikhara* thus:

In such cases (where a Muslim is unsure as to the correct action to take) people frequently ask God to send them a sign concerning the outcome. Then they pray and go to sleep. If they see the colours white or green in

their dream, or important religious personages, or envision peace and tranquillity, or pleasant, beneficial or beautiful things, then they decide that the waking life action will be beneficial and they undertake it with an easy heart. If they see the colours black, yellow or red, or an unpleasant type of person, or things that make them uneasy or which are ugly, then they decide that this action is not beneficial and they forgo performing it.

Moreover, Aydar (2009:126-127) reports that in several *hadiths*, including Bukhari, it is said that the Prophet Mohammed taught his companions *istikhara* and the detail of the *istikhara* prayer and recommended it to them. Aydar further reports that given the Prophet's recommendation to undertake *istikhara* then it is a *sunnah* action (Prophetic example) to be done if possible before embarking on any enterprise (2009:127).

The argument about Islam as probably the largest night dream culture in the world today poses a set of other questions, notably about Muslims' propensity to dream in a particular way as a culturally informed practice and imagination. In doing so, based on our respective fieldworks we present how Muslims perceive, imagine and narrate their dream experiences, and *istikhara* in particular. Yet, we consider *istikhara*, dream incubation practice, as a kind of Islamic folk healing practice. Therefore, we present ethnographic narratives from various corners of Muslim world concerning *istikhara*, and particularly rich narrative accounts as told by (British) Pakistani Muslims and an *istikhara* and Islamic healer from Bosnia-Herzegovina in order to open a question about the relationship between dreaming, healing and religion. As Csordas argues (1994: 1, 3)

Insofar as every culture must contend with emotional distress and mental illness, each is likely to develop its own forms of psychotherapy, some of which we can identify as religious healing (...) there is an experiential specificity of effect in religious healing (...) the locus of efficacy is not symptoms, psychiatric disorders, symbolic meaning, or social relationships, but the self in which all of these are encompassed.

In this paper through presenting several ethnographic-cum-dream micro-case-studies, we argue that dreaming as practised by Muslims of various cultural traditions, and the Bosnian Islamic healer's account of encounters with divine powers and malevolent spirits via dreams cast light on the dynamics of Muslims' inner and outer worlds as interrelated processes of embodied constructions of well-being, and also on a general Muslim cosmology of welfare.

Islam, dreaming and ethnographies

In multifaceted and tapestried Islamic traditions the practice of guidance following the *istikhara* prayer varies, and the decisive authority of interpreting dreams differs. The relationship as to authority over dream interpretations is even more obvious in a Sufi practice. In her fieldwork on British Pakistani Sufi orders, and particularly of the one founded by a charismatic Sufi saint, Shaykh Zindapir from the NWFP, Werbner (2003) learnt about Sufi cosmology from a senior Sufi, Hajji Karim, a follower of the Shaykh, and she provides a glimpse of such a guidance as told by Hajji Karim:

The *pir* (Shaykh) knows if a person is ready to embark on the journey (spiritual ascent) just by looking at the person, he has inspiration or revelation from God (*ilham*); otherwise, he can seek *istikhara*, indirect signs (a form of divination). There are two forms of *istikhara*: either the Saint reads a passage from the Qur'an and then falls asleep. At the start of his sleep he sees colours and signs which he can interpret as positive or negative. Certain colours such as green and white are positive; others such as black, red, or yellow, are negative. The other method is to read the opening *Surah* (chapter) of the Qur'an and repeat the words (after the third or fourth line) again and again while praying. In this wakeful repetition, the head will tilt to the left or the right and this will indicate whether the answer is positive or negative (Werbner 2003: 193-4).

In this excerpt we see that a Shaykh can perform *istikhara* for a follower and uses a rich colourful symbolism in order to reveal 'the truth' to his *murid*. The prayer and reading from the Qur'an is used in many Islamic traditions amongst the Sunni and Shia alike and we have found those practices during our fieldwork. The divinatory method of reading the inclination of the head, however, we have not encountered before. Interestingly, Werbner's studies confirm the central role of dreams and visions amongst Sufis and their Shaykhs reliance upon them:

His life, as told by him or about him by his disciples, has been the life of a friend of Allah, and as such it has been a life motivated by and moved teleologically through the guidance of divinely inspired dreams and visions.....He (Zindapir) has been guided, like all Sufi Saints (major Shaykhs) only by religious imperatives known to him through visions and dreams (Werbner 2003: 61).

In his famous portrait of Moroccan toolmaker Tuhami and his encounters with 'Saints, Jnun (Jinn) and dreams', Crapanzano (1975: 148-9) refers to the practice of *Stikhara* which refers to intentional dream incubation as practised in Morocco at a sacred site, such as a saint's tomb. Crapanzano reports that such practices are important amongst members of the Hamadsha sect likewise amongst ordinary Moroccans. Similarly, Nile Green (2003: 307) refers to the practice of *istikhara* in Islam that is used both by Sufis and ordinary pilgrims and entailed dream incubation, sleeping at tombs and performing the aforementioned cycle of special prayers. Also, Shaw (1992: 47) refers to the Temne people of north-eastern Sierra Leone's use of *istikhara* (called the *an-Listikhaar*). There Islamic dream diviners:

constructs an Islamic amulet or simply writes a passage from the Qur'an together with the client's name on a piece of paper, and prays to Allah for the solution to the client's problem before going to sleep with his head resting on the written sheet. The answer is revealed in the diviner's dreams.

Dilley (1992) in his study of the Tukolor weavers in Senegal and their reported inspiration through dreams in their craftwork, also describes the *istikhara* practice (here called *Listikhaar*). The learned Islamic clerics providing authoritative interpretations are called *marabouts*. Dilley describes this practice thus:

A person concerned over a family or personal matter might consult a *marabout* who practices *Listikhaar*. The client reveals his problem to him and requests that it be addressed to Allah through his intermediary, the *marabout*. The *marabout* then uses specified procedures to evoke dreams during a night retreat after the consultation with his client. He first prepares himself by performing ritual ablutions, offering up prayers and reciting his client's request that evening before he finally falls asleep. During the night it is said that a dream which contains guidance over the client's problem comes to the *marabout*, making it known whether his prayers have been granted or not.

However, there are no detailed scholarly studies, as opposed to occasional accounts in the above-mentioned examples, concerning the *istikhara* practice *per se* and its significance for a general Muslim cosmology of belief and well-being. Interestingly, one of the few is Aydar (2009) who reports that in 1991 he was considering marriage to a particular young woman but the family asked their Shaykh to perform *istikhara* for them and on the basis of that *istikhara* refused his marriage request.¹ Aydar then describes the psychological benefits of performing *istikhara* as through following the advice of an *istikhara* experience the person gains confidence in their choice of action and as we know through the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy, a positive approach to any endeavour may beneficially effect the outcome. Finally, having confirmed the very widespread use of *istikhara* across Islamic countries, Aydar writes that the dream version of *istikhara* is not specifically sanctioned in 'true religious sources' by which we understand him to mean the Qur'an and the strongest *hadiths*, such as Bukhari, Sahih and Moslem.

¹ Aydar is a Turkish academic living in Istanbul.

However, it is also clear from our own studies of the Qur'an and the hadith composed by Bukhari that dream interpretation is clearly defined in the *hadiths* as possibly being a way to access the divine will through *al-ruya* or true dreams (Edgar and Henig 2010: 65-67). Also the Prophet Mohammed describes true dreams that he experiences in the Qur'an (Lamoreux 2002).

Our recent researches on the role of night dreams in Islam (Edgar 2004, 2006a,b and 2007; Edgar and Henig 2010) in the UK, Turkey, Bosnia, Pakistan and Northern Cyprus have shown that *istikhara* as practiced particularly in marriage choice but also sometimes in political and business decision-making, by young and old alike, is a significant feature of a general Muslim cosmology of belief and well-being.

As we have seen above, *istikhara* involves reciting special ritual prayers before going to bed and meditation upon life choices, such as marriage, before sleeping. During his research on the inspirational night dreams, Edgar (2006a) interviewed one Pakistani woman living in the UK who did *istikhara* about her daughter's future marriage. She dreamt of a good looking bowl of dates which however in the event didn't taste very nice. She reported how this imagery anticipated the outcome of the marriage.

The following example, from Edgar's fieldwork is of a daughter (granddaughter of an ex-leader of an Islamic country) talking of her father's (a development consultant for a major NGO) use of *istikhara* concerning a business deal, when making a big investment with rather unknown people, he did it and dreamt of,

a large white cake which was cut into pieces: as white is a good colour and had a happy feeling so he went ahead with the investment; half way through the investment people turned out to be too clever; he had invested a lot of money and they were wondering if it had been a good investment, but when the money was returned it was much more than was expected; there was a rocky period but it came out well eventually.

One of Edgar's main informants during his research in Pakistan, the well known BBC journalist, Rahimullah Yusufzai, was asked to perform *istikhara* before he finally decided whether to accept a cabinet job in the newly formed

government of the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan. He did *istikhara* and then finally refused the post (cf. Edgar 2006b).

As we argue in this paper a propensity for dreaming about decision making related with the life cycle is a common practice ranging throughout the Muslim world, and amongst Muslims in Pakistan and British Pakistanis in particular.² When Edgar interviewed a young Pakistani woman's mother who did *istikhara* about a marriage proposal, she said

My Mother did Istikhara for her cousin; there was a proposal and she wanted to see: in her dream she saw a festive occasion and her daughter is standing in front of a pot of milk and you know, white is good; but my cousin was actually pouring this red liquid juice into it so there was a catch in it; eventually the whole pot turned; the marriage didn't happen and later they found out that he didn't come from such a good or nice family.

***Ishtikhara* in Bosnia: dreaming and imagination on the periphery**

In many respects, Bosnia-Herzegovina re-appeared on a map of the Muslim world only after the break down of Yugoslavia and the subsequent upheavals that resulted in to the single most horrific event of the aftermath of Yugoslav war, the Srebrenica Massacre. Although the ethno-religious nationalism has become a dominant everyday form of political identification in Bosnia-Herzegovina, we are concerned in this paper with a continuity of culturally informed Muslim ontology and cosmology, and of a dreaming practice in particular. The case study of *istikhara* practice from Bosnia-Herzegovina located on the periphery of the Islamic world, seems to be a well-suited ethnographic example, embracing the question about Muslims' propensity to dream in a particular way as well as showing particular culturally informed practice of *istikhara*, yet it enables us to contextualise and locate this dreaming practice within a general Muslim cosmology of well-being.

² Allen also reports that *salat al Istikhara* (prayer of proper guidance) is commonplace amongst Palestinian refugees in Shatil refugee camps (2006: 28).

Islamic healers in Bosnia as elsewhere provide a divinatory service to the lay Bosnian Muslims. One such practice is praying *istikhara*. As Bringa pointed out (1995: 215), these prayers are used particularly by women who come to ask the healer to pray *istikhara* on their behalf to predict the future. Particularly, the healers are often asked for praying *istikhara* by Muslim women while they are considering their marriage-choice. Similarly, among Muslim women in the mountains of Central Bosnia where Henig conducted his research an individual doing *istikhara* is not an unknown practice and often precedes their marriage-concerned decisions. In their confirmatory dreams, Muslim women often dream about a house with a nice colourful garden and with many flowers around, or about a house with a small wild garden and with sheep and lambs in it. These often mentioned dream images emerge in narratives to become culturally shared patterns and idioms of well-being as conceived by Muslims in the mountains. However, a revelatory potential of dreams, and dream symbolism might be also used by Muslims facing misfortune or physical and mental harm and subsequently as a way of counteracting those negative influences in order to recuperate from a harmed well-being.

The most obvious encounters with a negative divine power or spirits (*džin*, *jinn*) in rural Bosnia that might harm Muslim's well-being is *sihir* (sorcery, magic). Based on her fieldwork in Central Bosnia, Bringa (1995: 177-178) provides an account of how Muslim women faced afflictions that could not be diagnosed nor cured by doctors. Those afflictions were often described by the women as 'something has upset the person' by which a holistically conceived well-being of a person, that is, a synergy between belief, body and mind was severed (cf. Csordas 1994, MacPhee 2003). Bringa differentiates between attacks by malevolent spirits (jinn that may enter and attack a person), the evil eye (to be bewitched and get ill), or *sihir* (cf. Bringa 1995: 177-184).

In the mountains of Central Bosnia where Henig conducted his fieldwork, Muslims conceive *sihir* as a generic conceptual category in order to classify

any encounter with magical powers. As Azmir-baba, shaykh of a dervish order explained,

‘there are two meanings of *sihir*. One is the Quranic category that means “to be led astray from a right path”. The other one is *adet* [custom], that is, tradition and a set of customary beliefs in the Bosnian countryside. This is related to a black magic, to problems between people, neighbours or with particular life events, or unusual events such as a sudden illness of people or animals, misfortune and so forth. It might be caused by filthy eyes, or bewitching eyes and this might be unconscious. However, it might be also caused consciously by using of particular objects à la voodoo that have a power and capacity to act negatively and cause negative effects. Very often either parts of the body such as nails, hairs, menstruation blood or urine are used which has many negative effects, or some animals’ organs or blood. This is, then, usually dug in somewhere under the doorstep and when the person against whom the magic is targeted will walk through the door frame, or cross over the doorstep, she will be caught by the magic. If this happen, the person has to find someone with a positive power to get rid of the magic.’

If any Bosnian Muslim has been caught by a magic, or needs to anyhow counteract a negative malevolent power, misfortune or recuperate her somehow harmed well-being she has several possibilities of how to do that. Firstly, there are particular *dove* (prayers) that might be prayed before the person is about to leave the house in order to protect herself, however, those have only temporary effects. Apart from the two suras sometimes called as ‘suras of refuge’, that are, *Al-Falaq* and *an-Nas*, Muslims in some mountainous villages use other particular *dove*. Those *dove* have been used in the past by local *hodžas* (imams), who at the time functioned in the village division of labour also as healers. Although the traditional local religious and healing experts have been continuously replaced in past decades by more orthodox imams, often trained in the Gulf, who often reject such a practice as un-Islamic (cf. Bringa 1995, Ghodsee 2009), those particular *dove* are still

transmitted and used by lay Muslims in the mountains.³ Another form of protection against *sihir* is using and wearing *zapis* (amulet), a charm with either Qur'anic verses or particular *dove* written in arabic made by a healer or *hodža* (cf. Bringa 1995: 182). Nonetheless, all of these practices have a rather protecting power. However, in any case of sorcery attack, prolonged physical or mental afflictions or long lasting misfortune when a Muslim person is striving to recuperate her well-being, she needs to find a specialist.

In this case study we introduce Sadeta a seventy years old Islamic healer from the capital Sarajevo and we shall look at two moments in her life while considering dreaming and *istikhara* in particular. Firstly, we introduce the moment of revelation when Sadeta was 'called' to practice *istikhara* at the age of fifty three through dream messages. Subsequently, we shall introduce the practice of *istikhara* as conducted by Sadeta. Then, we introduce some of her dream narratives in order to illustrate and consider cross-culturally Muslims' dream propensity and how it relates to a general Muslim cosmology of well-being.

Dreaming as revelation

Sadeta had been called in her dreams to be a Qur'anic and *istikhara* dream healer. She has started to dream in 1990 and since she is often guided and instructed in her dreams by a young handsome man dressed in a white shirt that symbolises to Sadeta a dead *shahid* (martyr). At the time, she dreamt about the martyr aged 25-30 who told her what she has to do, that is, to help people and to heal people. In her revelatory dreams the martyr instructed her to veil herself into the golden *abaniya*, that is, a golden scarf which people who performed *hajj* usually brough back from the pilgrimage and which will be used to cover their bodies after death. Sadeta dreamt the same dream again and again, the young man did not calm her down until she followed the dream instructions about wearing the *abaniya*, even despite the fact she has not performed *hajj* yet. Since she had the first *abaniya* and went to the mosque to pray Sadeta has not had the dream never more. Nevertheless, when she

³ Some of them are in Bosnian language.

does pray *istikhara* she often dreams of the young man who is telling her what she should do. At the time, she had never prayed *istikhara* before, until she told other people about her dreams. Therefore, she was advised to visit one well educated *hodža* (imam) whom she told about her dreams and she was advised that she could have the capacity for dreaming *istikhara* and healing. The *hodža* then instructed her how to pray *istikhara* and how to interpret *istikhara* dreams and gave her two books to work with, one a guide to Quranic healing and the other for *istikhara*.

However, it was only after one *tevhid* (a collective prayer for the souls of the dead) in the early 1990s where Sadeta met one *hafiz* (a person who knows the Qur'an by heart) who discovered that she has the gift from God to help people. He instructed her how to pray against sorcery and gave her a special *dova* that had to be prayed 77 times. Moreover, it was during the war in the 1990s, that Sadeta once dreamt about an old woman and the woman told her 'do pray and don't be afraid of shells, bullets of anything'. It was the wartime when Sadeta's husband was old and ill and she had to go everyday for water and food. So she did this prayer, which she was told in the dream, every time she went out from the house. However, the women in Sadeta's dream did not tell her how many times she should pray the prayer that Sadeta was told in her dream. Therefore, she asked the *hafiz* who instructed her to do the prayer 1479 times between *Aksam-namaz* and *Jacija-namaz* (4th and 5th daily prayers) whenever she has a wish and the God will help her. Yet, the *hafiz* instructed her to help people but without charging them for money; let people pay her if they want, but never 'price the Quran'. Today, Sadeta does the prayers when someone needs God's help.

Sadeta's personal biography and life-narrative of encounters with divine powers can't be separated from her experience of being a healer. As there is a constitutive synergy of personal well-being, that is, between mind, body and soul, this emanates into the lifeworlds of other Muslims for whom Sadeta dreams and those experiences are contextualised and understood within the Islamic cosmological order. Thus, even now it is clear from Sadeta's narrative as to how she conceives her *istikhara* dreams and healing practice, that is,

the healing is done from Allah and Sadeta is a vehicle for this form of divine grace. This is highlighted by the fact that she does not use, as a gifted healer, the Quran to interpret her dreams and she rather deciphers dream symbols and interprets her dreams intuitively following a dream itself.

Narrating dreams and well-being

Sadeta in her practice of healing does two types of Islamic healing. She does pray *istikhara* for revelation, and/or (sometimes subsequently) praying specific *dove* from the Qur'an as well as those she got from the *hafiz* for particular conditions. In this paper, however, we only focus on Sadeta's rich colourful dream narratives of *istikhara* practice as those cast light on the most repeated requests she receives from her clients in order to see how Bosnian Muslims conceive, value and understand dreams in their lives. Nonetheless, it would go beyond the scope of the article to analyse tapestried dream motifs as a semiotic system of dream interpretation in Muslim Bosnia (cf. Holy 1991). We have determined three main tasks and/or moments in the life-cycle or crisis when and why Bosnian Muslims usually seek help from Sadeta, and for praying *istikhara* in particular. Those are, 1./ marriage choice, 2./ *sihir* and encountering the negative powers, and in such a case Sadeta's counteraction would consist of both dreaming and healing, 3./ well-being and protection against misfortune. *Istikhara* is part of the Bosnian Muslims' narrating of welfare conceived by all means as a practice related to embodied well-being.

Marriage narratives

Ehh, one young woman asked me for *istikhara*, she gave me her name and surname. I dreamt about a house (she didn't tell me where she lives), I came (in the dream) in front of a house, I see a house with two entrances. When I've entered the house I see a small wild garden and there were lambs and sheep. While I was in the garden I heard a voice saying: "I am interested in the young woman, I want to marry her, she will have much happiness in her life". When I told her about the dream, she said that her boyfriend has the same house. So, it means their fate is to stay together. Moreover, sheep and

lambs are usually slaughtered during such an occasion like a marriage; and also wool makes life easy so everything was beautiful in the dream.

What happened to me, just one example. I dreamt for one woman, she met a man who was a widower and the woman wanted to marry him. So she told me “Sadeta, please, pray *istikhara* for me”, as to whether she could marry the man or not; whether she would be happy with the man or not; so I was dreaming that I entered into a house, or into a flat because the man lives in the flat. And in the flat I see three flowers and now I was dreaming about the widower’s dead wife and she was telling me “I do not have anything about (against) the woman nor about the marriage but please” and she was showing me, holding in her hands the three flowers “make sure that she will look after the flowers”, and the flowers were very beautiful in my dream. I woke up, and told the dream to the woman; she had never entered the widower’s flat before so she asked him about the flowers in his flat. He asked her to come to his flat to see that he had the flowers in the flat. She found the same flowers I dreamt about in my dream. They got married and have stayed together.

On the other hand, although Sadeta is confident about her success with her *istikhara* practice she admits to the occasional apparent failure:

Sometimes I do dream about a good marriage and later people divorce. It’s possible, of course. I, for example, dreamt about ‘rosemary’ [flower usually used for wedding flowers] and the woman I had dreamt for later divorced her husband. But in most cases I am successful.

Narrating malevolent encounters

Sometimes the interpretation of a dream might be sorcery. One woman had a flat in Sarajevo and she bought a door but she couldn't place it properly, it was impossible. Therefore I did pray *istikhara* for her; I dreamt: it's very bad when you dream like this, that in front of the door someone hooked an ox. And now, I see an ox clearly, I see his meat is rotting, it isn't good. So, when I dreamt about the rotting ox, the dream itself was terrible, I told her – you have to dig up the threshold and the doorframe, there has to be *sihir* [sorcery]. Moreover, I had to pray various prayers against the evil powers for her to protect herself. I have got this special prayer from the *hafiz* (educated Moslem who can recite the Qur'an by heart) I told you about and in such a case it needs to be prayed 37 times. When the woman had dug up the threshold around the door, she found everything that you can imagine [sorcery items].

It's spread now, a lot of people do it to other people. *Jinns* [in this contexts negative spirits in the Islamic cosmology] attack but not without reason. But people do *sihiri* [sorcery], make *sihiri*. Especially since the end of the war there has been a lot of *sihiri*, because of envy among people; a man attacks a woman, people attack the harmony and the well-being of other households. I don't know who does it but there is a lot of *sihiri*. Maybe you won't believe it, but many women come to me, and they do often divorce.

Well-being

It depends, case from case, as to what is needed. This doesn't mean a medical curing but healing with the Qur'an. In this book [specific guidance concerning reading specific Qur'anic verses for specific healing conditions] I usually find what is needed and then I take the Qur'an and pray with the Qur'an. Look at this book, you can see which prayers are appropriate for particular illnesses or afflictions. For example, today I am very busy because many young people are preparing for their exams and they might be very nervous and lacking

in confidence. But that's [Qur'anic healing] something when you can't drink any pill to calm you otherwise you would be sleepy and so on. Ehh, and now, I do pray for her/them to lose their nervousness, to liberate her/themselves, and success, to pass the exams. However, it can't help everybody, only for those who believe that I have such a capacity to help.

The Practice of dreaming and healing

Sadeta prays particular *dove* for her clients on her own choosing certain days and times, that is, between the fourth and the fifth prayer (*Akşam-namaz* and *Jacija-namaz*), when she does remember the complete name of the person she is praying for and then the particular prayer and again the following morning when she does pray morning prayer (*Sabah-namaz*) in order to assure that her prayers will be received. Moreover, every Thursday evening, if she is asked, she does pray surah *Yasin* for the soul of the dead persons.

Sadeta's practice of *istikhara* itself is rather an obvious one. She does it as a non-obligatory prayer during the night, when she usually wakes up during the night about one a.m. and prays *istikhara* during which she remembers the person she is praying for and subsequently goes to sleep again. Moreover, she does remember the prayer and the person she prayed for again while she is already lying in her bed and then she does dream. However, she does not usually pray *istikhara* more often than twice a week, obviously on Friday and Monday as she wants to make sure that she will have a dream.

Overall, based on Sadeta's biography and dream narrative accounts Sadeta may be considered as a sincere and committed *istikhara* healer anchored in the Islamic tradition, which is however sanctioned by contemporary Imams and the hadiths with dreams being the only theologically sanctioned form of divination in the Islamic tradition. Her practice is arguably rather simple and intuitive and without recourse to Islamic dream interpretation books such as the ubiquitous (in Islamic countries and communities) Ibn Sireen volume for

interpreting dream symbols. She does not refer to the language of orthodoxy, and to the Qur'an only occasionally, and many if not most of the dream messages were from her perceived dream guide, the handsome young man. Auditory dream messages were commonplace but sometimes human and nature symbols were interpreted as per human experience in reality, i.e. flowers, sheep and houses. Her practice of *istikhara*, generally, seems to be predominantly about marriage choice, a way to discern beneficial and long lasting futures involving many unpredictable future events and possibilities. Her clients come from all strata and corners of Bosnian society, though female clients prevail.

Her skill as an *istikhara* practitioner has been seen by herself and her clients and some Imams as a gift from Allah. Her clients also experience her practice as helpful in dealing with misfortune, afflictions and with what Sadeta describes as the upsurge of sorcery cases in Bosnia since the 1992-5 war there. Whilst previously *istikhara* practitioners Edgar has encountered in the UK, Turkey and Pakistan do the dream incubation practice for themselves or their immediate family, Sadeta's example shows that this practice is a kind of Islamic folk healing and moreover the recent emergence of advertisements for *istikhara* in Sarajevo popular magazines also shows that this has become a lay form of indigenous non-biomedical and Islamic spiritual form of arguably mental health healing or at least personal life choice guidance. There are comparisons to be made with other forms of traditional folk and spirit based healing traditions.

Conclusion: Islamic dreaming through ethnographic comparison

Overall, *istikhara* in both its practice of daytime guidance and night dream interpretation appears to be a ubiquitous practice across Islamic lands.

However, whilst there are common threads to this practice, for example extra Islamic prayers before retiring to bed; the divinatory understanding that dream imagery may well be related to future events in this world, the interpretation of dream imagery in part through a consideration as to how symbols, such as nature symbols, are empirically perceived in this world, our Bosnian case study well shows that such a possibly near universal Islamic healing practice

intersects with local folk custom and practice such as in relation to sorcery. Dreaming and dream interpretation is embedded throughout the Islamic narrative as a generative feature of enhanced human decision-making, particularly through the inspirational example of the Prophet Mohammed. Well-being for many Moslems is conditional upon having a successful relation to their dream world in a not dissimilar way to Freud's well known dictum that 'dreaming is the royal road to the unconscious' or Jung's formulation of the way of individuation as being related to the successful integration of unconscious processes, such as dream imagery, into consciousness. So, radically different secular and spiritual/religious traditions and practices of psychological well-being are similarly orientated to the unseen, by the outer eye, hinterlands of the self.

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